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ABSTRACT

Fifteen years' experience of conducting politically controversial statewide research on rural/small school and Alaska Native educational issues in Alaska forms the background of this paper, which identifies practical strategies for gaining access to sites and data, developing support for research enterprises, and communicating information in ways that do not alienate the decision-makers the researcher is trying to influence. Steps recommended for the exploratory phase of research are identifying stakeholders, gaining the confidence of stakeholders by personally asking for their advice; and collaborating with practitioners or establishing a steering committee which includes them. Strategies suggested for the research design phase include framing research questions in non-threatening ways; keeping scientific validity as well as human credibility in mind; and creating a dissemination plan. Practices to aid in research dissemination include communicating preliminary results personally to stakeholders, using a mix of media (news articles, radio, television documentaries, slide shows, linking agents) to publicize findings, communicating findings in easily digested/discussed small pieces, tailoring reports to the audience, and repeating the message many times to create an impact. The paper cautions that, despite efforts to gain support for the research and to communicate the findings, it may well have little direct, observable impact on practical decisions. This does not, however, mean that the research has not been useful. (NEC)

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LIVING TO TELL THE TALE:

HOW TO DO RESEARCH ON POLITICALLY CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS AND COMMUNICATE YOUR FINDINGS

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Abstract:

Doing politically controversial research on educational issues at the statewide level poses a host of human problems in addition to technical, scientific ones. This paper identifies practical strategies for gaining access to sites and data, developing support for the research enterprise, and communicating information in ways that do not alienate the decision-makers you are trying to influence.

For the past fifteen years, we have done research on sensitive policy issues in Alaska education. One of our studies -- documenting the high level of social and emotional problems Alaska Native adolescents experienced away at boarding schools together with their low gains on achievement tests -- contributed to the demise of Alaska's boarding school system (Kleinfeld, 1973). Another study took on the question of whether state legislation intended to transfer control of rural schools to local Alaska Native communities had indeed had this effect or whether the schools were still under the control of distant non-Native professionals (McBeath et al., 1983).

Most recently, we have examined the quality of Alaska's small village high schools (ranging from a handful of students to one hundred students), the system that replaced the former boarding school system (Kleinfeld, McDiarmid, & Hagstrom, 1985). This study arose from an angry political controversy. The Alaska State Legislature was heatedly debating the question of whether or not the state should reopen a former Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding school for rural Native students. Alaska Native political leaders, school superintendents, regional and local school boards, and the State Department of Education were bitterly divided on the question. At stake were millions of dollars in educational funding. When the legislative debate reached a stalemate, legislators delayed the decision by asking the University of Alaska to do a study of small high schools. Thus, the arena for the political controversy shifted from the legislature to the research project itself.

Such controversial research studies are worth doing because they have impact not only on the policy decision itself but on how people think about major educational issues. This is research that makes a difference.

On the other hand, carrying out such controversial research can kill off the researcher. We have observed stakeholders unmercifully -- and unfairly -- attacking colleagues doing research of this type. Some researchers have lost the legitimacy necessary to do work in the state again.

Carrying out controversial research also poses difficult variations of perennial research problems. Will you get access to the sites and data you need or will gatekeepers try to keep you out? Some Alaska school administrators, for example, are reluctant to relase achievement test scores because they fear researchers will use the data against them.

You face the problem of how to communicate your results in ways that do not embroil your reseearch -- and you personally -- in deadly controversy. Killing the messenger is a time-honored method for handling bad news. you want people to debate the research, not to discredit the researcher.

Drawing both on our own experience and on the research literature on knowledge use and dissemination (Lindblom & Cohen, 1979; Dunn et al., 1982), we offer some practical strategies for:

* gaining access in politically controversial research studies

- developing support for the research, and
- communicating information in ways that do not alienate the people you are trying to influence.

We offer as evidence of the utility of these ideas that, after fifteen years, we are alive and well and doing research on controversial issues in Alaskan education. We also offer as evidence of the utility of these ideas the exceptionally high response rates -- typically exceeding 90 percent -- that we receive in these politically controversial research projects. Indeed, our response rates are typically much higher when we tackle research projects that are more controversial. This is because we take the time to implement the strategies we describe here.

Our central point is: **If you want people to think about and use your research, you need to think about the human side of the research as much as about the scientific side.**

You need to think about human issues not only at the end of the project, when you want to communicate your results, but right from the beginning.

Strategies for the Exploratory Phase of Research

1. Identify the Stakeholders.

Thinking clearly and systematically about the stakeholders is an obvious first step; yet it is a step easily forgotten. Whenever we begin a research project, we sit down with a pad and pen and try to figure out exactly who this research

will affect. Who are the various stakeholding groups and what are their worries, fears, and interests? What scope for action do they actually have?

This does not mean that you let political considerations (and your own estimate of what is possible) direct your research. Going through this exercise, nonetheless, gives you a much clearer view of the territory and the locations of the landmines. We generally find that this exercise increases our psychological autonomy. As in Aesop's fable of the man and his son who ended up carrying their donkey, it quickly becomes obvious that, no matter what you do, you will never please everyone.

2. Gain the Confidence of Stakeholders by Personally Asking for their Advice.

On the human side of research, the greatest technological innovation is - the telephone. No one, we have found, can resist requests for advice. Before we firm up a research design, we try to telephone the major stakeholders personally and ask for their suggestions.

We tell them what the research is generally about and we ask what specific questions they would like to see answered. What do they see as the pitfalls for research in this area? What is their own organization doing that is working and might prove valuable to others?

We do these interviews at a microcomputer so we can record each telephone interview easily. When we get back to stakeholders with the early research results, we open

their computer file and respond directly to the points they raised months earlier.

Practitioners typically perceive researchers as out to get them. In their view, researchers have virtually no ground-level knowledge of their situation. Researchers do not understand the difficulties and constraints within which they must work. Researchers just criticize them from a tower built of unrealistic assumptions. Initial telephone calls — where you ask practitioners for advice — counteract these views. The telephone calls also present you as a human being with your own worries and needs and not as a faceless robot.

One of my colleagues, who headed an especially sensitive research project, made it a point to call every rural school superintendent in the state several times to discuss his research plans. He got access to all his sites, he said, by "boring people to death." The superintendents finally told him that he should do the work himself, and not expect them to do his work for him. He should get on with it, they said, and leave them alone.

Human relations aside, these exploratory telephone calls increase the quality of the research. They give the researcher a much more complex and concrete view of the phenomenon to be studied.

3. Collaborate with Practitioners/Set Up a Steering Committee.

In doing controversial social research, either collaborate with practitioners or set up a steering committee which

includes them. Steering committees do have serious drawbacks. The personal communications and meetings take time and funds that might be otherwise spent on other phases of the research. The researcher risks the possibility that the steering committee will run away with the research -- using their legitimate but ill-defined authority to direct the study away from significant but sensitive issues.

In practice, we have found the gains that come from steering committees are well worth their costs. The steering committee gives you a microcosm of the political world into which you will launch your research results. Their responses serve as a early warning system: You can correct the course of your research design, your instruments, or your presentation of findings before you make the kind of mistake that causes the whole project to crash and burn.

Strategies for the Design Phase of Research

After doing this exploratory work, you are ready to sharpen your research questions, figure out your sampling strategy, and decide upon your methods.

At this stage, it is tempting to retreat to your office and commune with methodological and statistical texts. Resist this temptation. If you want your research to be used, you have to design the research with human beings -- not just the canons of scientific validity -- in mind.

1. Frame the Research Questions in Non-Threatening Ways.

Try to figure out a way to study the significant issues without organizing your study around research questions that will immediately threaten users. Pay attention to the stakeholders' language -- the words they themselves used when you talked to them -- and try to use their vocabulary as much as you can.

For example, in our study of village high schools the word "evaluation" was clearly a threat to many school people. The phrase "needs assessment" was not. We could study exactly the same issues under the rubric of "needs assessment." We still collected achievement test scores, for example; raising achievement test scores became a "need."

This was not merely sleight of tongue. Our own thinking evolved as we gained an understanding of the limited alternatives to the small high schools. If rural residents wanted to keep the schools and they were capable of offering a good secondary education, then we needed to find out in what areas the schools required strengthening.

2. Design Research from the Outset with Human Credibility, Not Only Scientific Validity, in Mind.

If you are trying to reach practitioners as well as professional colleagues, you need to think about two standards for evidence. One standard consists of the scientific paradigms and truth-rules of the scientific community. The other standard consists of what practitioners find believable and convincing. These two standards overlap, but they are by no means identical.

As an example, we have found that school people find it hard to accept the notion that a small sample can adequately represent a large population. We try to design our research so that at least one part of the study does include the whole population.

3. Design Research from the Outset with a Dissemination Strategy, Not Only the Research Report, in Mind.

If you are going to communicate your results in interesting ways that have dramatic and emotional impact, you need to plan your communication strategy before you go out into the field. You may need high quality photographs, videotapes, artifacts, or taped interviews.

Obtaining such materials can make your results much more convincing. These materials can also disarm your critics. In our study of village high schools, for example, we knew that some Native groups preferred boarding schools to the small high schools. The majority of the Native parents we interviewed, however, supported the village high schools and wanted a boarding school option. When we presented our findings at statewide meetings, we used (with permission) tape recorded interviews in which village parents presented precisely this viewpoint. These taped interviews made it difficult for others to attack our research on the grounds that we did not accurately represent Native opinion.

Strategies for the Research Dissemination Phase

Once the data comes in, researchers typically want to be left alone to do the analyses and write up the results. Researchers see the research report as the product of all their work -- their personal creation -- and they spend many hours writing and polishing it. Few practitioners however, bother to read the polished report on which the researcher has lavished so much energy -- and ego.

The time to start communicating your results, we have found, is <u>not</u> after you have written up the report. Start communicating results after you have completed the first basic analyses. Don't wait until you are done with the project to start communicating. At that point you are no longer as excited about the results. You are no longer as receptive to new viewpoints and interpretations. Once the report is written you may not even want to think about dissemination. Usually you want to get on to the next project.

1. <u>Communicate Preliminary Results Personally to Stakeholders.</u>

When you have a good sense of the general thrust of your findings, the time has came to telephone the stakeholders once again and talk over the results personally. Let people know what the early results are. Ask them if the findings make sense to them, given their more detailed knowledge of their own situation. Ask them for their interpretation of the results. Ask what other analyses of the data you could do for them.

People appreciate early news. It gives them command over potentially valuable information before it becomes public.

The stakeholders' reactions alert you to important qualifications of your results and to ways you may have been led astray by your data. You also see firsthand how users are likely to interpret -- or misinterpret -- your findings. As people respond to what you say, you see how you can frame your findings in ways that get your message across.

Telephoning stakeholders personally has an additional advantage: You can insure the research actually gets to them. As Knott and Wildavsky (1980) caution:

> Large organizational settings may inhibit policymakers who are responsible for making relevant decisions from obtaining the information; the welter of incoming material may cause it to become lost in the organizational system. Even if the material physically reaches appropriate decision makers they may be too busy to read it, or if they do, may not understand what is said (p. 545).

Do not let major stakeholders first hear about your research results in the newspaper. Newspapers want news. Newspapers want problems and conflicts. Newspapers want to make your study into a story. You can write a research report with the most careful attention to balance and tone and find all this work lost in the news article that is much more widely read than your final report. What has done most harm to our colleagues doing controversial research is the newspaper article!

If you have telephoned the stakeholders first and talked to them personally about the results, they are less likely to take seriously the newspaper version of your study. Sometimes stakeholders send us news articles about our research and express sympathy at how our findings were reported.

2. Use a Mix of Media to Get the Findings Out.

To communicate your findings to practitioners, think beyond the research report and the journal article. Think about who your target audiences actually are and how information typically reaches them.

Segment your audience so you can use a dissemination approach tailored to each group (Emrick & Agarwala-Rogers, 1978). Consider news articles, radio programs, television documentaries, slide shows, and other less conventional approaches.

Stakeholding organizations are often a good way to disseminate your findings. Many organizations, for example, publish newsletters and are looking for copy.

If you are not familiar with media, consider employing someone to help you. Consider investing resources in "linking agents" who connect researchers to practitioners.

Research on knowledge use underscores the significance of these linking agents (Hood, 1982). In the case of our small high school study, for instance, we asked the Alaska Association of School Boards to be our linking agent. This

organization disseminated the study's results directly to school board members, using materials we had prepared. We also employed a graduate student from the journalism department as a research assistant. She did a radio series on the village high schools directed at Indian and Eskimo village parents, who often have little formal education and who were unlikely to read a research report.

3. Communicate Findings in Small Pieces.

Most final reports present readers with information overload. Consider releasing information in topical chunks which are easily digested — and discussed.

4. Write for the Right Audience.

When you do sit down to write your research report or a brief summary of your findings, think about how to present your work in ways that have dramatic impact. Murray (1982) has made numerous useful suggestions on how researchers can "write to be read." Researchers, he emphasizes, should write in terms of people. When we wanted to present the negative effects of the boarding school system, for example, we started out with a story describing what happened to a village student who had left home to go to high school. The example was an actual case study. We chose this particular story because the student personified the statistical mean. The story presented in human images the statistics which followed.

In writing up research, remember also that most people will skim through your work. Get to the point quickly. Use

sub-titles that summarize your basic message. Use boldface, italics, and graphic devices to get your message across.

5. Say It Again, Sam.

Send your research message out again and again in different forms. Researchers typically fear repetition. They do not want to "milk" a study to increase their professional publications. Keep in mind that most decision makers need to hear a message many times in many forms before it has any impact.

Dangers on the Human Side

No strategy is risk-free, and dangers certainly exist in the strategies we are suggesting here. First, stakeholders may co-opt you. You may communicate with them so much that you see the situation largely from their point-of-view. While you need to be aware of this possibility, keep in mind that you will also be communicating with stakeholders on the opposite side of the controversy.

Second, the most effective way to communicate research results is to make the message brief, clear, and action-oriented. Sometimes research results are not brief, clear, and action-oriented. Sometimes research results are murky and complex, and the issues unfortunately do require more study. You need to resist the temptation to over-simplify.

Third, dealing with the human side of research takes a lot of time. Not every researcher has the time, inclination, or interpersonal skills. Again, think about linking agents.

The Need for Humility About What Social Research Can Offer Practitioners

What researchers rarely admit to themselves -- let alone to those who fund them -- is that research rarely yields useful prescriptions for action. Occasionally studies do have clear applicable results. More often research raises new issues, points out unforeseen risks of actions taken or not taken, and creates more complexity (Lindblom & Cohen, 1979).

A major effect of social research is not to "solve" problems but to change people's perception of the problems to be solved. Research influences the way people think about the problem, their explanation of its causes, and their estimate of its seriousness (Rich, 1981).

Despite all you may do to gain support for your research and communicate your findings, your research will probably have little direct, observable impact on practical decisions. This does not mean that the research has not been useful.

One of our favorite rural school superintendents is wary of the university and refuses to release achievement test scores we need. Now and then we call him up to talk about our research findings and about the educational problems his district is having. We have a rousing discussion. When we finish, he emphasizes, "Now don't let the fact that I won't give you these test scores stop you from calling me. It's always real interesting talking to you." When he says that, we figure we got the job done.

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